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# 24 Herbs for Home Grown Flavor



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE  
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY  
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



# 24 Herbs for Home Grown Flavor

By Dean Martin, extension horticulturist

HERBS HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO MAN and used by him for centuries. The discovery that certain plants possessed aromatic qualities probably was due largely to chance. Many uses were found for herbs, and they became an important item of trade. Today there is a revival of interest in herbs. People want to know which ones to use and how to use them. More persons would grow a few herbs in their gardens if they only realized how easy it is. This fact sheet is intended to help answer questions on herb culture.

Herbs are most familiar as flavoring agents, but they are also important for medicinal, aromatic, and ornamental purposes. This publication will be concerned only with culinary herbs—those used as flavoring agents in food. Many culinary herbs have ornamental value, as well, and that use is noted.

*An herb is any part of an herbaceous plant which is used for flavoring food; leaves are most commonly used, but seeds and roots of certain plants are often used too.* Spices also are used to flavor foods, but are obtained from parts of fragrant tropical plants; these plants ordinarily cannot be grown in temperate climate.

## USES

The herb industry is small but, nevertheless, very important. Herbs are used in the preparation of innumerable foods. Sausage-making requires a large amount of *sage*; *anise* seed is used extensively in candies and baked goods; *dill* is the principal ingredient in the preparation of dill pickles; and oils from *mint* are important flavoring agents in confections.

In recent years families have become larger consumers of herbs. More foreign dishes are being tried, new ways of preparing old dishes are being publicized, and hundreds of new recipes are appearing in various publications each month. The majority of these recipes require the use of one or more herbs. Then too, many families are becoming more gourmet conscious—they are learning to appreciate the varied and subtle flavors which herbs can impart to foods.

## THE HERB GARDEN

Because of their distinctive and pungent flavors, herbs are needed only in small quantities to flavor

foods. Therefore, only three or four plants of most herbs will provide sufficient fresh and dried seasoning for the average family.

Herbs may be planted in several locations. Many are ornamental and can be used to add beauty and fragrance to landscape plantings. One or more plants can be conveniently arranged in flower beds, borders, or rock gardens.

Herbs can also be grown in rows in the vegetable garden where they require little room. Plant the perennial herbs at one end of the garden or near other perennial vegetables or small fruits so they will not be disturbed each year.

Or, you may wish to plant herbs in a separate "herb garden." Locate this garden near the house for convenience in care and harvesting. The space required need not be more than ten feet square.

Figure 1 is a diagram of a small herb garden containing a few of the more popular herbs. Except for chives, mints, and parsley, space is provided for three plants of each herb. This is merely an example; you may prefer to grow other herbs or change the number of herbs or plants, particularly after your first experience in growing them.

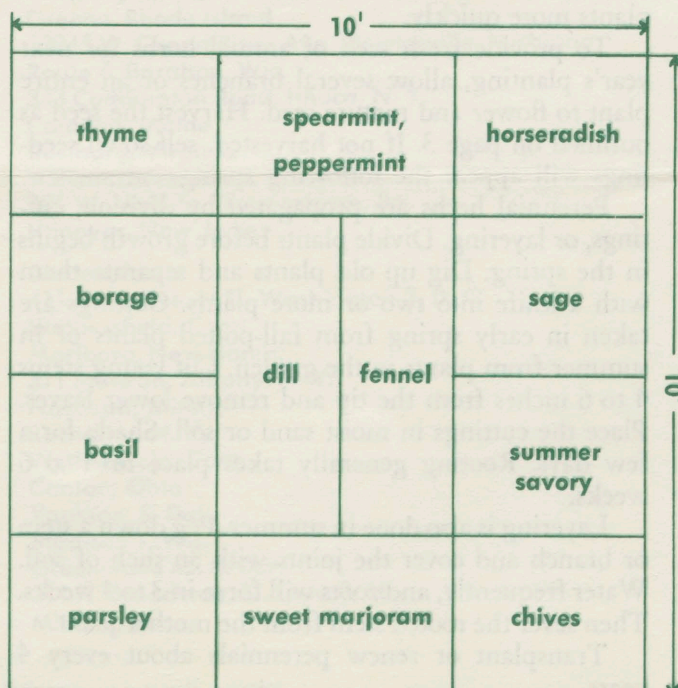


Figure 1. A small garden containing a few of the more popular herbs.



## GENERAL CULTURE

Growing and caring for most herbs is no more difficult than growing and caring for vegetables and flowers. A sunny location is preferable for the majority of herbs. Any good, well-drained garden soil will produce satisfactory plants. However, if the soil is too rich, particularly in nitrogen, the aromatic oils which provide the characteristic flavor and aroma may be of poor quality.

Soil preparation is the same as for planting vegetables. (See EC 668, "Vegetable Gardening.") After directly seeded plants or transplants have become established, the only care needed is watering during dry periods and cultivation to control weeds. Mints and cress will require more frequent waterings because of their preference for moist soil. A mulch of grass clippings, corn cobs, weed-free straw or hay, or black plastic can be used to control weeds and conserve moisture. If the soil needs fertilization, broadcast 2 pounds of ordinary garden fertilizer, or work in 1½ bushels of manure in the spring for a 10-foot square area. Herbs that are cut frequently during the growing season need additional fertilizer in the summer. In general, herbs are relatively free from insects and disease, but if these do become troublesome, use general control measures as you would for vegetables.

## PROPAGATION

The commonest method of propagating herbs is by seed. Seed may be sown directly into the soil outdoors, or it may be sown indoors and the young seedlings transferred to their permanent location when about 4 inches tall. The latter method produces usable plants more quickly.

To provide fresh seed of annual herbs for next year's planting, allow several branches or an entire plant to flower and mature seed. Harvest the seed as outlined on page 3. If not harvested, self-sown seedlings will appear the following spring.

Perennial herbs are propagated by division, cuttings, or layering. Divide plants before growth begins in the spring. Dig up old plants and separate them with a knife into two or more plants. Cuttings are taken in early spring from fall-potted plants or in summer from plants in the garden. Cut young stems 4 to 6 inches from the tip and remove lower leaves. Place the cuttings in moist sand or soil. Shade for a few days. Rooting generally takes place in 4 to 6 weeks.

Layering is also done in summer. Peg down a stem or branch and cover the joints with an inch of soil. Water frequently, and roots will form in 3 to 4 weeks. Then sever the rooted stem from the mother plant.

Transplant or renew perennials about every 4 years.

## POPULAR HERBS

### ANNUALS

Annual herbs complete their life cycle from seed to seed in one growing season, then die or are killed by cold weather. They are grown from seed planted every year.

**Anise**—This herb is a fragile-looking plant that reaches two feet in height. Leaves are cut finely and the tiny white flowers are borne in an umbrella-like cluster called an umbel. Seed is sown outdoors in May and the seedlings thinned to 6 inches apart. Seed yield is low.

**Basil**—This herb is often called sweet basil. The shrubby plants grow 1½ to 3 feet tall depending on variety. Leaves are thin, about an inch long; the flowers are white or lavender. Seed can be sown indoors in April and the young seedlings transplanted to the garden after danger of frost. Or, seed can be sown directly into the garden after the danger of frost. Plants should be spaced 9 inches apart. If plants are not allowed to flower and go to seed, several cuttings can be made.

**Borage**—This is a coarse herb. Leaves are rough and hairy, oblong to oval in shape. Plants may grow as tall as 3 feet producing clusters of pretty, light blue flowers. Seed is sown outdoors in April and the plants thinned to one foot apart. Seedlings do not transplant well unless very young. Since the plants mature quickly, you may want to make a second sowing for a continuous supply. Use only young leaves.

**Chervil**—This herb is not easily grown. It prefers a moist, partially shaded location. In appearance chervil resembles parsley, but the leaves are lighter green, more lacy, and fernlike. The flower stalks which bear small white umbels, reach 1½ feet in height. Seeds should be started outdoors in April and the plants thinned to 6 inches apart.

**Coriander**—This herb should not be grown in the herb garden or among flowers because of the unpleasant odor of the plant. It will quickly grow to a height of 2 feet. Seed does not need to be sown until late May. Thin plants to stand 3 inches apart.

**Cress**—This cool-weather plant is also called Upland or Garden Cress. Its lacy leaves resemble watercress but are larger and more peppery flavored. The plant is small and goes to seed as soon as the weather becomes warm. Sow seed outdoors as early as possible in the spring. Thin the plants as you need them, using only young leaves.



**Dill**—This herb grows 3 feet tall with feathery foliage and a pretty blue-green color. Flowers are small and yellow, produced in an umbel similar to anise. Seed should be sown about the same time as cucumber seed. The plants are spaced about 6 inches apart. The plants are tall and slender and may need to be staked to prevent them from falling over. The plant dies as soon as seed is produced; therefore, you may want to make more than one planting.

**Summer Savory**—This weak-stemmed, branching herb grows about 1½ feet tall. It grows well in dry soil that is low in fertility. Seed should be sown outdoors after danger of frost. Plants are thinned to 6 inches apart. Summer Savory flowers in a short time; clip back or harvest branches to force new growth. More than one sowing can also be made for additional harvesting.

## PERENNIALS AND BIENNIALS

The perennials in this group are tender and will not survive South Dakota winters. The biennials, while hardy, complete their life cycle the second year by going to seed, hence must be renewed annually. With the possible exception of Rosemary, these herbs are started each year from seed.

**Caraway**—This is a hardy biennial which flowers and produces seed the second year from planting, then dies. The leaves are finely cut, and the small white flowers are borne in umbels. Plants will grow 2½ feet tall. Seed need not be sown until summer. After thinning, the plants should be about 9 inches apart. Seed yield is low.

**Fennel**—This semi-hardy perennial is cultivated as an annual. Two types are commonly grown—sweet fennel and Florence fennel. The former grows 3 to 4 feet high while the latter is about 2 feet high. The feathery bright green foliage and yellow flower resembles dill, but the plant is more branched and more attractive. Sweet fennel may require staking. Both kinds make useful border plants. Seed is sown outdoors in May and the young seedlings thinned to 6 inches apart.

**Parsley**—This hardy biennial is usually cultivated as an annual. It is a low-growing plant with very fresh-looking, dark green leaves. Both cut-leaved and curly-leaved varieties are available. Seed is very slow to germinate. For an early harvest, sow seed indoors in March and transplant seedlings to the herb garden when large enough. If seeds are sown outdoors, start in April and sow a few radish seeds to mark the spot.

Space parsley plants 6 inches apart. Leaves may be harvested any time as long as the plant is growing vigorously. Parsley also makes an excellent edging plant for flower beds.

**Rosemary**—This herb is a tender perennial. It grows about 1½ feet tall and is rather shrubby and ornamental. The leaves are small and narrow, gray on the underside. Plants or cuttings may be set out after danger of frost, or the slow germinating seeds can be started indoors in March. Transplant young seedlings to the garden after danger of frost is over, spacing one foot apart. Since the plants are not winter hardy and are slow to grow from seed, they can be propagated from year to year by potting plants in the fall and taking cuttings the following spring.

**Sweet Marjoram**—This tender perennial is a small bushy plant growing about 15 inches tall. The leaves are small, gray-green in color. The small white flowers are enclosed in green bracts. Another marjoram, pot marjoram, is frequently grown as a potted herb. Seed may be sown either outdoors or indoors in early spring. Nearly 3 weeks is required for seedlings to appear. Indoor-grown seedlings should be transplanted outdoors when a sufficient size. Space plants about 9 inches apart.

## PERENNIALS

The herbs in this group may form seed the first year but continue to grow year after year. They are generally hardy, although a few may need to be covered in the fall with several inches of mulching material or a mound of soil. Perennials can be grown from seeds, roots, bulbs, or plants.

**Chives**—This herb is closely related to the onion but is milder. The plants grow in clumps nearly a foot tall topped by tufts of soft lavender flower heads. Leaves are grass-like and may be cut as often as there is enough regrowth. It is easier to start plants from clumps than from seed. Whichever is done, plant early in the spring. Space plants about 6 inches apart. Chives also make an attractive edging and border plant.

**Garlic**—This herb belongs to the onion family and should be planted in the vegetable garden. It is cultivated similarly to onions. A garlic "bulb" is composed of many "cloves." Separate the cloves and plant 4 inches apart and 1 inch deep in a trench. Do this in April or when you ordinarily would plant onion sets. Harvest when the tops turn yellow; store like onions.



**Horseradish**—This is a root herb that grows best in deep soil. It is a corase-leaved plant with surprisingly pretty white flowers. It is propagated by root cuttings planted in April. Slant the cuttings slightly as they are placed in the soil, with the top about 3 to 4 inches below the soil surface. Allow a foot between plants. Since the horseradish is very coarse in appearance and tends to become weedy, you may want to plant it in the vegetable garden.

**Lavender**—The dried leaves and blossoms have a clean, sweet fragrance. The English species is very fragrant and grows 1½ feet or more tall. It is a very attractive ornamental with misty gray-green foliage and lavender flowers that bloom in July. Plants may be started by sowing seeds indoors in late winter, but it is difficult. If plants are purchased, set outdoors in May, the same as transplants, about 9 inches apart. Plants must have winter protection. Harvest just as plants are bursting into full bloom.

**Lemon balm**—This herb grows 2 feet tall bearing a bushy mass of pretty lemon-scented, yellowish-green, crinkled leaves. The flowers are small and either yellow or white. Seeds are planted indoors like tomato seeds. Seedlings are later transplanted to their permanent location where spacing is 1½ feet between plants.

**Lovage**—This is a tall, rugged plant, with celery-like leaves and inconspicuous yellow umbels. Plants may be started from seed sown indoors in March or outdoors in May. Set plants one foot apart.

**Mints**—Peppermint and spearmint are the two most popular mints. Plant characteristics differ between the two, however. Spearmint is stiffer, taller, and more woody; its leaves are pointed, sharply serrate, often hairy, and grow close to the stem. Peppermint is weaker in growth and less woody; its leaves are rounded at the tips, smooth, and do not grow so close to the stem. Purchase plants and set them out in early spring at least 1½ feet apart. One plant of each kind is sufficient. They spread quickly by means of stolons or runners, so you may not want to plant them among other herbs.

**Oregano**—Sometimes called wild marjoram, it is a more vigorous, more upright plant than sweet marjoram and has larger leaves. It grows about 1½ feet tall and produces small pink flowers. The English strain is the one that should be grown because of its growth habit and the fine pungent flavor. If plants are purchased they should be set out in April. Seed is expensive and should be sown indoors in March and the young seedlings later transplanted outdoors. Distance between plants should not be less than one foot.

**Sage**—This is perhaps the most popular of the herbs. It is a shrubby ornamental plant 1½ to 2 feet tall. The leaves are downy, pebbly, grayish in color; narrow oblong in shape; the flowers are purple. Seed is the usual method of propagation; however, a variety called Eolt's Mammoth is propagated only by division or cuttings. Sow seed outdoors in April or indoors in March. Transplant young seedlings to the garden later. Space plants about one foot apart. Established plants should be pruned to six inches each spring.

**Tarragon**—The best kind for flavor is French Tarragon. It must be propagated by root division for it rarely produces seed. Do not buy seed—It will be the Russian Tarragon which is an annual of poor flavor. The erect branching plants grow 2 feet tall and have small, smooth, narrow leaves. Buy plants and set them out in May about one foot apart. Plants need protection from winterkilling.

**Thyme**—Several varieties are grown; all are less than one foot tall, bushy, and very attractive as ornamentals for edging or rock gardens. The plant produces tiny green or gray-green leaves and lilac blossoms. Seed preferably should be sown outdoors in March and the young seedling transplanted outdoors in May, about one foot apart. It is a good plan to take cuttings each year in case older plants winterkill.

These are by no means all of the herbs that can be grown. Consult the references listed at the end of this fact sheet if you are interested in growing other herbs.

## HARVESTING, CURING, STORAGE

For fresh seasoning, leaf herbs may be used as soon as the plant has produced a good number of leaves. However, you will not be making full use of the herb garden if you do not store some for winter. Most herbs are easily stored and will retain their aroma and flavor for at least one year.

The proper stage for harvesting foliage of the majority of herbs is when the plant is in vigorous growth, just before flowering begins. This also prevents many fast-growing annuals from seeding and forces new growth for additional harvests. Harvesting should be done on a clear, dry day. Cut off the branches so there will be a few leaves remaining at the base of the plant. Any drift or chemical residues must be removed by washing in cold water before drying. Perennial herbs must be allowed to make good regrowth before freezing weather or they may winterkill.

There are three ways to dry leaf herbs: 1) tying loosely in small bunches and hanging; 2) spreading loosely on a frame of hardware cloth, screening, or cheese cloth, or 3) stripping off leaves and spreading on trays. Whichever method is used, do not forget to label the herbs. Drying is best accomplished in a cool,



clean, dry, dust-free room where it can be done as quickly as possible. **Do not dry herbs in the sun and do not use artificial heat.**

When dry enough to crumble, place the leaves—either whole or crumbled—in labeled jars and cover tightly. This keeps out dust and preserves aroma and flavor. Examine the jars for a few days. If any moisture has condensed on the inside, dry the contents further. Herbs must be thoroughly dry to keep well. Herbs whose foliage is commonly dried are basil, sweet marjoram, sage, thyme, balm, savory, tarragon, lavender, parsley, dill, fennel, mint, oregano, chervil, lovage, and rosemary.

Herbs grown for seed—anise, dill, fennel, coriander, and caraway—should be allowed to ripen. Then harvest before the seeds start to drop. Place seeds and attached parts on paper or cloth to dry under the same conditions prescribed for drying leaf herbs. Thresh and screen out dirt and refuse. Spread the clean seeds on a square of cheesecloth, bring the ends together, and tie. Hang in a cool, dry place until thor-

oughly cured. Place in labeled jars. If possible, keep jars of herbs in a cool, dry place away from sunlight.

Several herbs may be potted in the fall for fresh use during winter and spring. Do not use old plants—use young ones started from cuttings or by layering. Take as much of the root system as possible along with surrounding soil. Reduce the amount of foliage by clipping off a few leaves. Treat them as house plants and place in a south window. Herbs that can be grown as potted plants include basil, chives, mints, parsley, sweet marjoram, and rosemary.

## REFERENCES

- Culinary Herbs*, Minnesota Extension Bulletin 284, 1957  
*Culinary Herbs in North Carolina*, North Carolina Extension Circular 273, 1944  
*Herbs*, Dorothy Hogner, Oxford University Press, New York, 1953  
*A Primer for Herb Growing*, Herb Society of America, Boston, 1954  
*Savory Herbs*, Farmers' Bulletin 1977, United States Department of Agriculture, 1946

## SOURCES OF PROPAGATING MATERIAL\*

Because none of these sources handles all 24 of the herbs discussed here, write to two or more sources for catalogs. If you are purchasing plants, remember that one or two is enough. Most herbs can be increased readily by one of the methods of propagation discussed in this fact sheet.

	Source	Address
Plants . . .	The Garden of Herbs	Box 414, Rt. 2, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho
	Roger's Herb Farm	Holbrook St., Norfolk, Mass.
	Devonshire Nursery, Howard Howe	P. O. Box 425, Vista, Cal.
	Taylor's Garden	2649 Stingle Ave., South San Gabriel, Cal.
	The Tool Shed Herb Nursery	Salem Center, Westchester Co., N. Y.
Plants and Seeds . . .	The Cottage Herb Gardens	Washington Cathedral Mt. St. Albans, Washington 16, D. C.
	Greene Herb Gardens, Inc.	Greene, Rhode Island
	Hav' alook Garden	10045 W. Grand River Ave., Fowlerville, Michigan
	The Potters of Baraboo	Route 4, Baraboo, Wis.
	The Herb Enthusiast	343 Coddington Road, Ithaca, N. Y.
	Merry Gardens	Camden, Maine
	Plantation Gardens	Rustburg, Virginia
	Village Hill Nursery	Williamsburg, Mass.
	Youngsville Floral Gardens	305 W. Main St., Youngstown, Pa.
	Forbes Garden Center	Hanover, New Jersey
Seeds . . .†	W. Atlee Burpee Co.	Clinton, Iowa
	Bolgiano Seed Co.	411 N. Y. Ave. N.E., Washington 2, D. C.
	Comstock, Ferre Co.	Wethersfield, Conn.
	Cottage Herb Farm	Marlboro, New Hamp.
	Cottage Herb Farm Shop	311 State St., Albany, N. Y.
	Farmer's Seed & Nursery Co.	Faribault, Minn.
	Joseph Harris Seed Co.	Rochester, N. Y.
	Charles Hart Seed Co.	Wethersfield, Conn.
	Holmes Seed Co.	Canton, Ohio
	Gurney Seed Co.	Yankton, S. Dak.
	Old's Seed Co.	Madison 1, Wis.
	George Park Seed Co.	Greenwood 45, S. Car.
	St. Louis Seed Co.	411 N. Broadway, St. Louis 3, Mo.
	Woodruff Seed Co.	Milford, Conn.

\*This list does not constitute an endorsement by South Dakota State University; it is merely a service.

†Most of these sources also carry horseradish roots and garlic bulbs.



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